

It was business as usual at Pinewood Elementary Monday - and that's what makes the school "one of the best in the ."

U.S. Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., told students, teachers, staff and parents that Monday as he congratulated them on the school's 2006 Blue Ribbon award.

As Terry and Rogers Johnson, director of intergovernmental relations for the U.S. Education Department, entered the gymnasium, students were singing and doing hand movements along with their music teacher.

Rather than chatting among themselves and fidgeting, the kindergartners through sixth-graders were engaged.

Rebecca Gibson, the school's music teacher, said she often guides students in song while they are waiting for performances to begin.

"It keeps their mouths busy, and I get my music in," she said.

Terry and Johnson joined Omaha Public Schools Superintendent John Mackiel and Pinewood Principal Pamela Johnson for the ceremony at the school at 6717 N. 63rd St. It was one of 250 schools nationally to receive the award.

Blue Ribbon schools are first nominated by officials from their state departments of education. An extensive application process follows. In each of the selected

schools, students have shown continuous academic progress over the past five years. More than 40 percent of the schools' students must come from low-income families.

What makes Pinewood different from the typical school doesn't stop with how the staff prepares for assemblies. Before each school year begins, teachers, parents and students meet to discuss their goals for the year and what will be expected of each.

Sharon Myers, who teaches first- and second-graders at the school and also has a daughter and granddaughter attending, said the students are able to track their own progress.

She also said students are taught to their ability levels - unlike in typical settings, where grade levels are ceilings for what students can learn.

"You never know how far they can go unless you take them there," she said.

Rogers Johnson, the education official, pointed out to students and staff that in the 1997-98 school year Pinewood's achievement scores were near the bottom. "Eight years later you're at the very top."

He told the crowd of more than 300: "You've followed the principle that all students can learn. I wish I could take that to every school in the country."

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